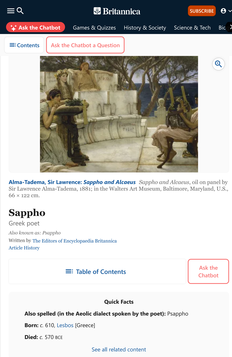

Alma-Tadema, Sir Lawrence; *Sappho and Alcaeus* *Sappho and Alcaeus*, oil on panel by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1881. in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.. 66 × 122 cm.

Sappho

Greek poet

Also known as: Psappho
Written by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica
Article History

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Ask the Chatbot

Quick Facts

Also spelled (in the Aeolic dialect spoken by the poet): Psappho
Born: c. 610, Lesbos [Greece]
Died: c. 570 BCE

See all related content

Top Questions

- Why is Sappho important?
- What was Sappho's family like?
- What is Sappho best remembered for?

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Sappho (born c. 610, Lesbos [Greece]—died c. 570 BCE) was a Greek lyric poet greatly admired in all the poetry of her writing style. She ranks with Archilochus and Alcaeus, among Greek poets, for her ability to impress readers with a lively sense of her personality. Her language contains elements from Aeolic vernacular speech and Aeolic poetic tradition, with traces of epic vocabulary familiar to readers of Homer. Her phrasing is concise, direct, and picturesque. She has the ability to stand aloof and judge critically her own ecstasies and grief, and her emotions lose nothing of their force by being recollected in tranquility.

Legends about Sappho abound, many having been repeated for centuries. She is said, for example, to have been married to Cercylas, a wealthy man from the island of Andros. But many scholars challenge this claim, finding evidence in the Greek words of the bawdy of later Comic poets. Most modern critics also consider it legend that Sappho leaped from the Leucadian rock to certain death in the sea because of her unrequited love of Phaon, a younger man and a sailor. She had at least two brothers, Larichus and Charaxus, and may have had a third. A fragment from Sappho that is dedicated to Charaxus has survived. One of her poems mentions a daughter named Cleis or Clais. The tradition that she fled the island or was banished and went to Sicily may be true, but she lived most of her life in her hometown of Mytilene on Lesbos.

Her work contains only a few apparent allusions to the political disturbances of the time, which are so frequently reflected in the verse of her contemporary Alcaeus. Her themes are invariably personal—primarily concerned with her *thiasos*, the usual term (not found in Sappho's extant writings) for the female community, with a religious and educational background, that met under her leadership. Sappho herself attacks in her poems other *thiasoi* directed by other women.

Britannica Quiz
Ancient Greece

The gravity of the Sapphic *thiasos* is the education of young women, especially for marriage. Aphrodite is the group's tutelary divinity and inspiration. Sappho is the intimate and servant of the goddess and her intermediary with the girls. In the ode to Aphrodite, the poet invokes the goddess to appear, as she has in the past, and to be her ally in persuading a girl she desires to love her. Frequent images in Sappho's poetry include flowers, bright garlands, naturalistic outdoor scenes, altars smoking with incense, perfumed unguents to sprinkle on the body and bathe the hair—that is, all the elements of Aphrodite's rituals. In the *thiasos* the girls were educated and initiated into grace and elegance for seduction and love. Singing, dancing, and poetry played a central role in this educational process and other cultural occasions. As was true for other female communities, including the Spartan, and for the corresponding masculine institutions, the practice of homoeroticism within the *thiasos* played a role in the context of initiation and education. In Sappho's poetry love is passion, an inescapable power that moves at the will of the goddess; it is desire and sensual emotion; it is nostalgia and memory of affections that are now distant, but shared by the community of the *thiasos*. There is a personal poetic dimension, which is also collective because all the girls of the group recognize themselves in it. An important part of Sappho's poetic oeuvre is occupied by epithalamia, or nuptial songs.

It is not known how her poems were published and circulated in her own lifetime and for the following three or four centuries. In the era of Alexandrian scholarship (3rd and 2nd centuries BCE), what survived of her work was collected and published in a standard edition of nine books of lyrical verse, divided according to metre. This edition did not endure beyond the early Middle Ages. By the 8th or 9th century CE Sappho was represented only by quotations in other authors. Only the ode to Aphrodite, 28 lines long, is complete. The next longest fragment is 16 lines long. Since 1898 these fragments have been greatly increased by papyrus finds, though, in the opinion of some scholars, nothing equal in quality to the two longer poems.

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Literature › Poetry

lyric

poetry

Also known as: lyric poetry
Written by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica
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Key People: Mick Jagger • Francis Scott Key • John Gay • Frédéric Mistral • Bjørnstjerne Martinius Bjørnson
Related Topics: poetry • ballad • hymn • song • prose poem

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lyric, a verse or poem that is, or supposedly is, susceptible of being sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument (in ancient times, usually a lyre) or that expresses intense personal emotion in a manner suggested of a song. Lyric poetry expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet and is sometimes contrasted with narrative poetry and verse drama, which relate events in the form of a story. Elegies, odes, and sonnets are all important kinds of lyric poetry.

In ancient Greece an early distinction was made between the poetry chanted by a choir of singers (choral lyrics) and the song that expressed the sentiments of a single poet. The latter, the *melos*, or song proper, had reached a height of technical perfection in "the Isles of Greece, where burning Sappho loved and sung," as early as the 7th century BC. That poetess, together with her contemporary Alcaeus, were the chief Doric poets of the pure Greek song. By their side, and later, flourished the great poets who set words to music for choirs, Alcman, Arion, Stesichorus, Simonides, and Ibycus, who were followed at the close of the 5th century by Bacchylides and Pindar, in whom the tradition of the dithyrambic odes reached its highest development.

Reading and interpretation: "The Onset" by Robert Frost What do a frog and a poet have in common? Ask Robert Frost.

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Latin lyrics were written by Catullus and Horace in the 1st century BC; and in medieval Europe the lyric form can be found in the songs of the troubadours, in Christian hymns, and in various ballads. In the Renaissance the most finished form of lyric, the sonnet, was brilliantly developed by Petrarch, Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and John Milton. Especially identified with the lyrical forms of poetry in the late 18th and 19th centuries was the Romantic poets, including such diverse figures as Robert Burns, William Blake, William Wordsworth, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Goethe, and Heinrich Heine. With the exception of some dramatic verse, most Western poetry in the late 19th and the 20th century may be classified as lyrical.

Britannica Quiz
Poetry: First Lines

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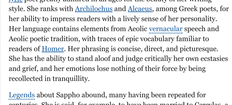
This article was most recently revised and updated by Meg Matthias.

Philosophy & Religion › Ancient Religions & Mythology



Schadow, Gottfried: Fates sculpture The three Fates spinning the web of human destiny, sculpture by Gottfried Schadow, 1791, part of the tombstone for Count Alexander von der Mark; in the Old National Gallery, Berlin.

Fate

Greek and Roman mythology

Also known as: Moira, Moirai, Parca, Parcae
Written by The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica
Last Updated: Aug 13, 2025 • Article History

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Greek: Moira **Plural:** Moirai
Latin: Parca **Plural:** Parcae
On the Web: ABC listen - The Drawing Room - Whatever will be, will be: Our changing attitudes to fate (Aug. 13, 2025)

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Fate, in Greek and Roman mythology, any of three goddesses who determined human destinies, and in particular the span of a person's life and his allotment of misery and suffering. Homer speaks of Fate (*moira*) in the singular as an impersonal power and sometimes makes its functions interchangeable with those of the Olympian gods. From the time of the poet Hesiod (8th century BC), however, the Fates were personified as three very old women who spin the threads of human destiny. Their names were Clotho (Spinner), Lachesis (Allotter), and Atropos (Inflexible). Clotho spun the "thread" of human fate, Lachesis dispensed it, and Atropos cut the thread (thus determining the individual's moment of death). The Romans identified the Parcae, originally personifications of childbirth, with the three Greek Fates. The Roman goddesses were named Nona, Decuma, and Morta.

This article was most recently revised and updated by Amy Tikkanen.

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